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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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THE CHASSEVANT METHOD OF MUSICAL EDUCATION.

BY M. P. GIBB.

IT is now universally acknowledged by the best authorities that the first few years of a child's musical education are of the greatest importance, but perhaps we do not sufficiently realise how complicated is the process which occupies the mind of a child when he begins to learn to play on the piano, or any instrument. He has to think of the names of the keys, the names of the notes on the staff, the correspondence between these and the keys of the piano, not only to identify C as C, but to decide *which* C is indicated, he has to think of the value of the notes, and last, but *not* least, how to hold his hands, use his fingers, and produce the right tone. Is it any wonder that unless a child has naturally a strong desire to learn music, he should become discouraged at the outset? There is no other study, so far as I am aware, which under the ordinary method involves so many difficulties in its early stages, and I am therefore glad of the opportunity of bringing before you a method which seems to me not only to minimise the drudgery, but to present the study of music under an aspect which can hardly fail both to interest and to educate, in its widest sense, the child-mind. For, after all, is not the popular conception of musical education a somewhat limited one? Is not its recognised aim often restricted to the mere being able to play or sing, and is not a child's progress too often measured by the number of pieces or songs got up within a certain time?

When I say that the Chassevant method provides a means of musical education in its widest sense, I mean that it draws out the intelligence generally, gives an exact knowledge of music, trains the ear and the intellect to understand its language, and prepares the mind for a cultured appreciation of the works of our great masters.

In discussing this point some time ago with a friend, I was struck with an illustration which she made use of; she said, "It is exactly like learning a language, such as French.

There are two methods of doing so:—the superficial method, which, by the mere parrot-like repetition of phrases, may give one a certain facility in conversation, and the intellectual method, by which one seeks to grasp the very genius of the language, in order to appreciate its literature and understand the people to whom it belongs."

Of late years there have been many efforts made to put the teaching of music, especially in its elementary stages, on a more intelligent basis. Notable amongst these is Mrs. Curwen's method, which has proved a source of inspiration to many young teachers. There is also, of still more recent date, the Fletcher method, brought out by a clever young American lady, and which has some strikingly original features. It is interesting to note that the leading principles found in these methods are also found in the Chassevant method, though each has its own manner of applying them.

My attention was first drawn to the Chassevant method in the summer of 1899 in Geneva, when a friend invited me to accompany her to the last of a course of lessons on the subject. My interest was keenly aroused, but it being the end of the season nothing more could be done then. During the winter I corresponded on the subject with my Swiss friend and finally decided to go direct to the founder of the method at the conservatoire in Geneva, and study it thoroughly. I had the privilege, not only of receiving a course of private lessons, but of being admitted to all the classes at the conservatoire—the latter a *peculiar* privilege, accorded, I was given to understand, on account of my long experience in teaching.

Mademoiselle Chassevant is a French lady, now well advanced in years, who has been associated with some of the most eminent musicians of her day, and having a keen faculty of observation, as well as of receptivity, she has profited by such association in the building-up and developing of her method. Added to this, she is possessed of striking originality and has studied the child-mind so patiently and so assiduously that her method, while embodying the best modern ideas regarding musical training, has several features which are quite unique.

Its underlying principle, especially in the earlier stages of training, may be stated thus: in order to bring before the

mind of a child something of which it is absolutely ignorant, always speak of it under a familiar and natural form, never under a severe scholastic form. The chief objects aimed at are:—1st, the development of the ear, as regards both rhythm and tune; 2nd, appreciation of the laws of expression; 3rd, facility in reading at sight; 4th, cultivation of the memory; 5th, training of the fingers. These points are taken up separately, and in the order in which I have named them. In accordance with the clearly-expressed opinion of Robert Schumann, it is held that the development of the ear is the thing of greatest importance in musical education, and that this ought to be begun at a very early age, and carried on for a considerable time before any practical music is attempted. Much can be done by drawing the attention of a child to the difference in the sounds produced, say by the clock, the cuckoo, the wind. The feeling for rhythm may be developed by teaching him to march in time. About the age of five, or even less, regular systematic training may be begun, the study of time and tune being taken up separately.

A most ingenious device has been hit upon by which the study of time has been transformed into an exercise of fascinating interest for the child-mind. A lady, Mme. la Mesure, is supposed to live in a beautiful house, surrounded by smiling gardens and shady trees. She has everything that heart could desire, excepting one thing, the absence of which causes a feeling of indescribable sadness. The children's interest is aroused and they are led to discover the cause, viz., *that there are no birds*. Mme. la Mesure, in order to remedy this, builds a pavilion, with four bars stretching from side to side, one above the other. This she places in the garden, and sets out in search of birds. She returns in triumph, having procured four different kinds, which at once take possession of the pavilion. The first, a large round bird, which flies very slowly, alights on the first bar; the next two, which are exactly alike and fly twice as quickly, take up their position on the second bar; then a set of four, which fly still more quickly, alight on the third bar; and lastly, there are eight little birds, which are in such a hurry to secure the top bar that some of them join hands or rather wings. The rate at which the different kinds of birds fly

is so exactly in proportion that the last of each set arrives in its place at the same moment as the solitary big bird on the lowest bar. Next morning, when Mme. la Mesure visits the pavilion, she finds that the birds have all flown away, but, on a closer inspection, she discovers curious little marks left in their places, these of course being the appropriate *rests*. The fugitives are discovered in a tree with branches to correspond with the bars in the pavilion, and they assure her that they intend returning at sundown, and that, in the meantime, their places are being reserved for them. I need not carry out this phantasy. Picture pavilions and trees are given to the children, and by making use of another of the Chassevant inventions, *the box of movable signs*, a charming variety of exercises becomes possible, exchanges being made between the pavilions and the trees, and in an incredibly short time the children gain an exact idea of the value of the different notes and their corresponding rests.

I may say here that I have found it of great advantage to make use of the French names of the notes until the children are perfectly familiar with them. They *describe* the notes so exactly as to impress them easily upon the mind.

From the first the children are taught to *beat time*, with the idea of imitating the regular flight of the birds, a figure which appeals forcibly to their imagination. This exercise being begun so early enables them to face with comparative ease and precision the difficulties of time and rhythm in their after musical study.

As regards *tune*, the voice is, of course, the natural medium through which the ear is developed, and it is interesting to find that in teaching the children to sing, the syllables made use of are very similar to our *sol-fa*; not that this involves a separate notation, but simply that the children are taught to give these syllable-names to the notes on the ordinary staff. A series of carefully-graded exercises is used, introducing at an early stage bright little melodies and rounds. The movable signs are in constant use in connection with all these exercises, and the formation of scales acquires the charm of a game of dominoes or a Chinese puzzle. In working with the movable signs, the children are taught always to use *both hands*, thus early accustoming the *left* hand to do its share. When they have become sufficiently familiar

with the different kinds of time, short rhythmical phrases are dictated to them, and they arrange these on the staff with the movable signs.

At a later period, *tune* as well as rhythm is taken up in the dictation exercises, but as a separate thing, and always after the rhythmical difficulties have been disposed of: that is to say, the phrase is first dictated as a simple exercise in time, and the children select notes of the right value and arrange them in bars. Then the phrase is sung to them or played on the piano, and they simply move the notes into their relative places on the staff. Generally the same phrase is played or sung in two or three positions, to accustom the children to the difference in pitch, and also to enable them to *read* in the different octaves. Next they are called upon separately to sing the exercise which they have just written, and finally they sing it all together, beating time as they do so.

With regard to the second object aimed at in the Chassevant method, facility in reading at sight, a definite portion of every lesson is set apart for this purpose, and of course the dictation exercises already described help in this direction too, as they make the children familiar with the notation. There are also some excellent sight-reading exercises given on the Figurative Clavier, another of the Chassevant inventions. It is hung up above the key-board of the piano, and the children sing the notes as they are indicated, and they soon begin to be able to sing intervals, both major and minor.

You will readily see what a help this Figurative Clavier is when children begin the piano. It gives an exact idea of the correspondence between the notes written and the notes played, thus preventing any mistake about the octaves, a fault common with even fairly advanced pupils. In connection with this, great stress is laid on the advisability of making pupils play exercises, not only where they are written, but in several other octaves and very specially in the bass, so as to accustom the ear to the low sounds as well as to accustom the eye to the appearance of the bass notes in reading.

Next, as to training the memory. All the great pianists of the day play without music, but perhaps we do not realise what a strain this involves unless the habit has been acquired in childhood, in which case it is comparatively easy. It is necessary of course, with a child, to make a careful distinction

between work which is *in course of study*, and work with which he is thoroughly familiar. In the former case it would be disastrous to allow him to practise it without the music, but I think he ought to be encouraged to *aim* at being able finally to play it correctly from memory.

Here I should like to describe to you an interesting experience which I had during my last visit to Geneva. The German pianist and teacher, Risler, was giving a six-weeks' course of finishing lessons at the Academy of Music. He is in the habit of visiting the various musical centres on the Continent for this purpose, and I had the privilege of being present during one afternoon's lessons.

The pupils, who are of course at an advanced stage, are expected to play music which they *know thoroughly*, and which they have probably worked up under other teachers. All that Risler does is to criticise work supposed to be finished, *to give*, as he says, *his impressions of it*, and then to play it himself as a model for further attainment. It was interesting to find that however difficult and complicated the music, the pupils were expected to play it from memory. Only one failed in doing this, and Risler told her that before attempting to play it to him again, she must know it well enough to dispense with the notes, that he did not consider work thoroughly studied which could not be played from memory. It was not *merely* playing from memory that was required, but to be able, after having been stopped, perhaps in the middle of a bar, and asked to play the same phrase over and over again, to catch up the point and go steadily on. The Chassevant method leads up to this in an easy and natural way, by requiring the children after a certain number of lessons, to write and also to sing from memory the little studies which they have been working at.

The children are next introduced to the study of *expression*, and this by means of what we might call "object-lessons." They are taught that music is a language, capable of expressing every variety of emotion. There is the story of the child who loves, and who wonders how to express this to his mother, the child who suffers, the child who is joyful, the child who works, and the child who is grateful to God. A special song is written to give voice to each of these sentiments, and the various shades of meaning are brought

out, as for instance, when the child assures his mother that when he grows up he will act worthily of her love, his voice becomes louder and more emphatic, and then as he is gradually overpowered by sleep, his voice becomes softer and softer until it ceases altogether.

A chorus for several voices is introduced to bring home the idea that even a child cannot accomplish much alone, and that a life which is isolated will always lack completeness. About the age of six, or six and a half, a series of gymnastic exercises is begun, with a view to preparing the fingers, wrists and arms for instrumental playing. These, too, for the greater part take the form of object lessons, the models which they are to imitate being generally things with which they are familiar in every-day life.

To make the fingers strong and supple they have an exercise which is attributed to Chopin. To enlarge the stretch between the fingers, they have exercises in which they are supposed to imitate the action of small scissors trying to cut a large piece of cloth. To gain independence of the fingers, they are told to imitate little birds when they are learning to fly, and leave the nest one by one. For contraction and extension of the fingers they imitate a group of birds, first crowding together and then flying off in all directions. For the articulation of each finger they imitate the action of two hammers meeting together. For the displacement of the fingers, they imitate the movement of mill-wheels. For the independence of the thumb, there are various exercises. There are special wrist exercises, both for the up-and-down motion and for the side-to-side motion, also exercises for the arm. The importance of these finger-gymnastics has come to be so generally acknowledged that they have been taken up as a separate study, and in some parts of the Continent there are special classes for them. To add to the interest in practising these and also to enable the children to keep time, there is a bright little song specially prepared for each exercise.

To give some idea of results, I might perhaps describe exactly what I saw in a class of twelve children, varying from about six and a half to nine years of age. First of all they had an exercise in reading at sight, one by one, from the Figurative Clavier, the notes being pointed to, and an

occasional sharp or flat introduced. This they did very correctly, especially the younger ones. Then they had a dictation exercise, several phrases being played on the piano, and they arranging them on their boards. Then each one was asked to sing a bar alone, beating time, and very few mistakes were made, either in tune or rhythm. Afterwards they all sang it together, then transposed it and sang it at the new pitch. Next came some exercises in different kinds of time, followed by the writing of scales, and the way in which this was done seemed to me wonderful for such young children. There being no question of time involved, they used the small black notes, the red ones for sharps and the blue ones for flats. After writing, say the scale of D, in the ordinary G clef, and putting red notes for F and C to indicate the sharps, they were told to take away the G clef, put the C clef on the third line, and then put in the sharps or flats required for the new scale thus formed. Next came some finger gymnastics, then an exercise in intervals, which they formed on their boards and afterwards sang. Last of all, they had an exercise in reading at sight from their books. This was done bar by bar, each child singing alone, and beating time, then vocalising, and finally singing it with the words all together, and paying some attention to the expression. In the older classes the work was, of course, proportionately more advanced, but on the same lines.

I have, perhaps, said enough to show you that when a child of average intelligence, who has been trained on this method, begins the piano or the violin, say at seven years of age, most of the initiatory difficulties have already been overcome. His ear, his eye, his memory, his fingers, his general intelligence regarding music, have all been to some extent developed, so that having none of the usual discouragements to face, he is likely to make rapid progress. This method also gives a chance to the child whose musical faculties are slow in developing. There are few, if any, children who are not in some degree susceptible to music, and a training such as this could hardly fail to draw out any musical faculty which he possessed. For the child who never takes up the study of any instrument at all, this class-teaching would still furnish a degree of musical culture which would be most valuable to him in after life, and without which one's education can hardly be considered complete.

But the Chassevant method does not stop here. It goes on alongside of the study of the instrument, conducting the pupil through the more advanced stages of theory and even elementary harmony, and enabling him to sing at sight studies of ever-increasing difficulty. For pupils who have already begun the piano or violin, it proves a most valuable aid. Indeed, it might be taken up at almost any stage of musical education.

Now, as to my own personal experience of the method, I began several classes in Glasgow last winter, which are again in full working order, in addition to several new ones. At the outset I had no doubt in my own mind as to the possibility of gaining the interest of the children, but the result has far exceeded my expectations, and even in the case of the youngest, the amount of progress made has been most gratifying. Far from showing any weariness before the end of the lesson, the children always seem disappointed when it is time to stop.

Several who attended my classes last year have now begun regular music-lessons as well, and are showing more than ordinary intelligence. They are constantly making delightful discoveries of old friends under new conditions, and the little gymnastic exercises have prepared the fingers so that there is not the usual awkwardness in approaching the keyboard. One of them said to me the first time I showed her an exercise on the piano for separate finger-action—"Why, that is quite easy! It is exactly like the hammers knocking together, only you do it on the piano with one hand at once!" In the case of older pupils I had not felt quite sure that the system could be so successfully applied, but here, too, the results are excellent. The use of the Movable Signs seems to be a delightful relief to the ordinary manuscript work, and the enthusiasm shown by all of the pupils makes the classes a source of great delight to myself. At the end of the lesson, the remark is often heard—"Must we stop? I have never known an hour pass so quickly."

I have one remaining Chassevant invention to describe, though it is altogether apart from the ordinary class-work. It is a species of clavier, which is used to aid the study of the piano. It corresponds in size with the ordinary piano keyboard, but the notes are fixed. There is a special series

of exercises prepared for it, which could not be performed on the piano, at least without subjecting the ear to the most excruciating torture, and it is claimed that these are of great value in inducing a correct position of the hand, strength, flexibility, and independence of the fingers, and freedom in wrist-playing. In addition to this, the use of the clavier seems to induce a habit of correct fingering and of intelligent reading. To use it correctly it is necessary to read in advance of what one is actually playing, and thus analyse the harmony contained in each bar. It is not intended in any sense to take the place of practice on the piano, but rather to lessen its mere mechanical drudgery, as also the nervous strain involved.

My own feeling with regard to it is, that for young children a short time devoted to it each day might be profitable, *if under careful supervision*, but otherwise it would be almost useless. For older pupils, however, who can be trusted to use it correctly, its value is unquestionable. On this point I can again speak from personal experience, having for some time made use of these claviers in my senior class, generally devoting about ten minutes to simultaneous technical exercises. In every case there has been a distinct improvement in the pose of the hand and the action of the fingers and wrist.

In the method accompanying it there are two principles strongly insisted upon, viz.:—1st, *that the technical ought to be separated from the musical*, and, 2nd, *that the movements required to produce certain results ought to be separately analysed*.

Those who know anything about the Virgil Clavier method will be struck with the accordance of ideas here, and yet Mademoiselle Chassevant had never heard of the Virgil Clavier until I told her of it. May I suggest, in passing, that it would be worth while for any teacher to look into the latter method. There is a great deal to be gained from it, whether one approves of it entirely or not.

There is also a strong family resemblance between these Clavier methods and the Deppe method, so much so as to give one the impression that at some time or other both Mademoiselle Chassevant and Mr. Virgil may have come in contact with Deppe, and discussed "first principles" with him.